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ABSTRACT

Retention and social promotion are expensive failures. History and research show that retention and social promotion are ineffective in improving student learning and achievement. The alternative to these failed strategies is to personalize the learning environment. Research indicates six promising strategies for personalization, thereby reducing the need for retention and social promotion: creating a positive school environment, providing early intervention to prevent school failure, fostering continuity of teacher-learner relationships, providing meaningful curriculum and instruction, providing extra help and extra time, and creating effective home-school discussion. Personalization occurs when a school is committed to high achievement from at-risk learners; when opportunities are presented for early prevention of school failure; when at-risk students and teachers know, trust, and respect each other; when at-risk students find curricula meaningful and relevant; when instructional practices increase at-risk students' personal investment in learning; when extra time and extra help are provided to support learning; and when there is strong parental involvement in students' academic progress. Meaningful instruction taught by competent teachers in caring school environments helps at-risk students become competent learners, thus preventing the need for retention and social promotion. (Contains 95 references.) (RT)

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481 FASTBACK

Alternatives to Retention and Social Promotion

William A. Owings
Leslie S. Kaplan

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Alternatives to Retention and Social Promotion

by
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Introduction

Retention and social promotion are expensive failures. The alternative to these failed strategies is to personalize the learning environment.

Education research repeatedly shows that retention does not work (Owings and Magliaro 1998; U.S. Department of Education 1999). Requiring students to repeat a grade because they have not met expected performance standards — assuming no change in instructional strategies — leads to continued low achievement, increases the likelihood of retained students dropping out, and disproportionately affects minority and economically disadvantaged students.

Likewise, social promotion is an institutional and individual failure. Popularly practiced in recent years in the "presumed interest of a student's social and psychological well-being, without regard to achievement" (U.S. Department of Education 1999, p. 5), social promotion keeps students that fail with their age group, rather than enforce high academic standards for which students and schools must be accountable. Allowing students who have not successfully met performance standards to pass on to the next grade seldom improves learning or achievement.

So what are schools to do?

Personalizing the learning environment offers promise. This practice incorporates a number of strategies for preventing academic failure and for providing extra assistance when students need help meeting academic expectations. These strategies include creating a school culture committed to at-risk students' academic success, providing interventions to prevent early failure, offering continuity in teacher and learner relationships, ensuring a relevant and engaging curriculum and sound instruction, giving extra time and extra help, and securing strong parental involvement.

In this fastback we begin by summarizing the problems with retention and social promotion. Then, as an alternative to these problematic strategies, we detail some of the promising strategies for personalizing the learning environment so that all students can succeed in school.

Retention and Social Promotion

More than 50 years of research have shown that grade-level retention provides virtually no academic advantages to students (Owings and Kaplan 2001; Owings and Magliaro 1998; Reynolds, Temple, and McCoy 1997). Recently, grade retention has come under popular examination yet again. In spite of the research, Public Agenda's "Reality Check 2000" noted that a majority of employers, professors, teachers, parents, and even students agree that it is better for failing students to repeat their present grade "to catch up," rather than to be promoted to the next grade without having learned the required skills. In his 1997, 1998, and 1999 State of the Union Addresses, President Clinton called for increased retention of students who earn low scores on standardized tests, stating that a child should not move from grade to grade "until he or she is ready."

Increased political pressure on schools to demonstrate student achievement has pushed more and more educators to retain failing students in order to implement stricter promotion standards. From 1980 to 1992, the national percentage of retained students increased from about 20% to nearly 32% (Roderick 1995). The sim-

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plistic view of retention as a panacea for education woes has a negative effect on children.

A Short History of Retention

Teachers in the early United States most often recorded each student's learning progress in a narrative report. Grouping by grades in elementary schools did not become a common practice until the 1860s. Then educators grouped children of the same age and achievement by grade levels, wherein students mastered a quota of content to merit promotion to the next grade. The simple narrative progress report evolved into a complicated promotion policy based on a mastery level.

By 1900, defining curriculum content mastery levels to qualify students for promotion had become difficult. The New York City School system examined this issue. Maxwell's (1904) New York age-grade progress study became the standard vehicle for school system reporting on retention, promotion, and dropouts. This document showed a range of student grade-level retention in New York City of 20% to 70%. During the next two decades, researchers started to examine the efficacy of retention in terms of student achievement.

Grade retention was intended to improve school performance by allowing underachieving students more time to develop adequate academic skills (Reynolds 1992). It did not take long for researchers to realize that negative effects of retention could outweigh the positive intent. The federal government began to play an important role in the investigation of retention and

dropouts. In 1908 the Government Printing Office published Thorndike's study that detailed "elimination," the then-popular word for dropouts. This study showed the association of grade-level retention and "student elimination" from school. It also showed that 81.7% of U.S. students entering school between 1900 and 1904 were "eliminated" before the ninth grade.

In the 1930s several researchers reported the negative effects of retention on achievement (Ayer 1933; Kline 1933; Nifenecker and Campbell 1937; Otto and Melby 1935). Goodlad (1954) summarized the research between 1924 and 1948 relating to grade retention and showed that retention did not decrease the variation in student achievement levels and had no positive effect on educational gain. Otto (1951) also suggested that repeating grades had no special educational value for children, demonstrating that the academic gain of retained students was smaller than the gain of promoted matched counterparts.

Midway through the 20th century there was a resurgence of interest in research on the relationship between retention and dropouts. Berlman (1949) indicated that retained students tended to drop out of school more frequently than those not retained. The study also determined that many of the participants who had experienced grade-level retention and then dropped out were as intelligent as, or more intelligent than, those who eventually graduated. This article appeared in a period when the literature was starting to emphasize the need to keep students in school.

However, it is interesting to note that the 1960 third edition of the American Educational Research Associa-

tion's *Encyclopedia of Educational Research* still referred to grade retention as "retarded progress" (p. 4), and the topic was indexed under "retardation" (Harris 1960).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the pendulum moved toward social promotion, passing failing students to the next grade to keep them with their age group. Advancing them with their peers, educators reasoned, would benefit weaker students psychologically and socially; and these students would likely "catch up" academically with increasing maturity and motivation. In the 1980s the pendulum swung back. The public began to lose confidence in schools, partly because of stories of violence, poor teaching performance, and poor student achievement. In 1983 a panel of education and political leaders determined that the U.S. public school system was placing our nation "at risk" (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). As a result, many school systems instituted more stringent promotion and retention policies in spite of the lack of research evidence to support such changes (Roderick 1994). To the public, however, it was counter-intuitive to think that retention would not help students to catch up (Natale 1991).

Current Retention Practice and Research

Although no precise national data indicate the exact number of retained students, the retention practice continues and may have increased in American schools despite the lack of supportive research. One study reported that by the ninth grade, approximately 50% of all American students have been retained at least one

time (Center for Policy Research in Education 1990). Another study (Roderick 1995) reported that the proportion of over-age students entering high school has risen almost 40% since 1975. One synthesis of research on grade retention indicated that the current level of grade retention matches that of the early 20th century (Shepard and Smith 1990).

We reviewed 66 articles on retention written in the 1990s. Only one study (Lenarduzzi 1990) mildly supported retention practices; however, a follow-up evaluation refuted the earlier findings (Lenarduzzi and McLaughlin 1992). The remaining 65 articles did not support the practice of retention. For this discussion, the research can be placed into five categories: the dropout connection, demographics, early retention, social implications, and achievement implications.

The connection between retention and dropping out of school is still evident and consistent after almost 50 years of research. One writer stated that a heart-attack victim had a better chance of surviving than a child who has been retained has of completing high school (Frymier 1990). Many studies, more than 80 years after Thorndike, show the association between retention and dropping out of school. These studies control for the effects of other factors that influence the decision to drop out. Grissom and Shepard (1989), for example, determined that retention significantly increased the probability of dropping out of school, controlling for prior achievement, sex, and race.

Retained students come more often from lower socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds than do non-retained stu-

dents (Thomas et al. 1992). Meisels and Liaw (1993) found that approximately 40% of repeaters came from the lowest SES quartile, while only 8.5% came from the highest SES quartile. Meisels and Liaw also determined that more than two-thirds of all retentions take place between kindergarten and third grade. Other studies have shown that retained students more often tend to be male and African-American and come from homes of less-educated parents than do non-retained students (Byrd and Weitzman 1994; Dauber et al. 1993; Foster 1993; Meisels and Liaw 1993). A study for the state of California (George 1993) found that retention rates for African-Americans and Hispanics were twice the rate for whites.

Byrd and Weitzman (1994) also examined social and health factors associated with retention. Poverty, gender, mother's education level, hearing and speech impairments, low birth weight, enuresis, and household smoking exposure were significant factors in predicting retention. Learning disabled students also may be retained more frequently than the general population (McLeskey, Lancaser, and Grizzle 1995).

For years a common belief was that the earlier a student was retained, the more effective retention would be. However, the idea that early retention is best for students continues to be refuted in the literature (Johnson et al. 1990; Mantizicopoulos and Morrison 1992; Thomas et al. 1992). Studies of retention in kindergarten indicate that retained students performed significantly lower on standardized achievement tests than did other students who were not retained (Dennebaum and Kul-

berg 1994). Another study showed no differences in achievement for retained kindergarten students and the matched control group (Shepard and Smith 1987). Some research indicates that early retention may have a short-lived increase in achievement; however, this increase vanishes in two or three years (Butler 1990; Karweit and Wasik 1992; Snyder 1992).

The professional literature continues to demonstrate the negative social implications of retention. Kindergarten students who were retained indicate a slightly more negative attitude toward school than did a matched control group (Shepard and Smith 1987). Retained students may have more behavioral problems than those who are not retained (Meisels and Liaw 1993). Rumberger (1987) suggests that retention contributes to a permanent disengagement from school.

Retention also may have negative effects on long-term student achievement. Holmes' (1989) meta-analysis was definitive in the area of grade-level retention and achievement. He reviewed 63 controlled studies comparing retained student progress with lower-achieving promoted students' progress. Fifty-four studies showed negative achievement results for retained students. Holmes then reviewed only those studies with the greatest statistical control. The negative achievement effects again appeared. These findings appear substantively identical to Goodlad's 1954 analysis. Subsequent studies have shown little new evidence to contradict Holmes' research synthesis.

Other studies indicate an increased, cumulative negative effect of retention on achievement for at-risk stu-

dents (Reynolds 1992). Retained children may continue to decline in academic achievement over time compared with non-retained students in reading. Some question remains as to whether this cumulative decline is seen in math achievement.

Social Promotion

Social promotion began in the early 1960s as a well-intentioned misapplication of the retention literature. The research findings were clear: Retention has virtually no positive effects for children, non-retained children achieved as much or more than their retained counterparts, and retained children were at risk of dropping out of school. Then why not move children along the grade levels? This logic became increasingly persuasive in schools. Social promotion appealed to the nurturing side of most educators. Retention damaged student self-esteem. Moving a child along helped the child socially, did not appear to harm the child academically, and did not place a student at risk for dropping out. Social promotion provided a simplistic alternative to retention with a positive public relations spin for parents: Over-age students would not be in the regular classroom to "corrupt" younger students.

But a new problem arose. Research did not address what would happen when students learned they were not accountable. The earlier studies on retention did not control for the long-term effects on motivation and learning. With time, some students saw that they would be promoted without academic effort on their part.

Teachers were the first to see the effect this had on students who worked diligently to achieve. Parents began to perceive that education was being "diluted" to accommodate the self-esteem of nonproductive students.

Also, many socially promoted students could not connect to the learning requirements of the next grade because of significant skill and knowledge deficits. Increasingly, they could not comprehend instruction because they lacked the cognitive skills from prior learning. As a result, they continued to fail.

In 1983 the publication of *A Nation at Risk* galvanized public sentiment against some of the counter-intuitive practices in education, social promotion being the chief one. Social promotion became a political touchstone for presidential candidates. By 1995, anti-social-promotion platforms had won bipartisan support (Viadero 2000*a*). And now, when everyone is touting high standards and we have entered an era of high-stakes testing, political pressure is intense *for* retention and *against* social promotion. But, in fact, both practices are failures.

Summary

The real issue lies in finding alternatives to failed practices. Historically, educators considered retention as a means to reduce skill variance in the classroom in an attempt to meet students' learning needs. Clearly, based on this brisk walk through retention research, this practice does not work. In the process, we have harmed our clients. Educators would do well to take an oath similar to that of physicians — first, do no harm.

Retention harms an at-risk population both cognitively and affectively.

Retention and social promotion are expensive institutional and individual failures. Alternatives should be considered that vigorously prevent and promptly remedy students' learning difficulties, providing increased opportunities for their success.

Effective systemic and instructional alternatives exist that can prevent much student failure and keep them learning. All students *can* achieve standards if educators vary the time, pace, curriculum, learning style, and assessment techniques and tailor students' learning experiences to their needs. This is, essentially, personalizing learning.

Personalizing Learning

Personalizing the learning environment consists of several promising strategies for preventing academic failure and for providing extra assistance when students need help meeting academic expectations. Research indicates six ways that the learning environment can be personalized, thereby significantly reducing the need for retention and social promotion. These include:

- Creating a positive school culture.
- Providing early intervention to prevent school failure.
- Fostering continuity of teacher-learner relationships.
- Providing meaningful curriculum and instruction.
- Providing extra help and extra time.
- Creating effective home-school partnerships.

Each of these strategies merits a brief discussion.

Creating a Positive School Culture

Beginning in the 1980s, researchers argued that low-achieving, alienated students required a school culture of high expectation for all students' achievement with-

in a caring community (Cuban 1989; Hargreaves and Fullan 1998; Phillips 1997; Walmsley and Allington 1995). An academically rigorous and supportive school culture motivates many students, especially impoverished, low-achieving, and disinterested students, to attend school and learn (Comer et al. 1996; Payne 1997).

Cawelti's (1999*b*) Benchmark Schools Study identifies five critical practices observed in schools that report high student achievement with at-risk students: 1) A schoolwide focus on clear standards and on efforts to improve results, 2) committed staff, 3) teamwork, 4) principal leadership, and 5) multiple sustained changes to improve student achievement.

Clear and High Standards. Successful schools set clear standards for students to meet at key grades, explicitly stating what students should know and be able to do, with periodic benchmarks to help measure progress (Codding and Rothman 1999; Navarro and Natalicio 1999). Likewise, these schools regularly measure student achievement and use these data to improve results.

In addition, successful schools set unequivocal expectations for families and communities, and the community holds schools accountable by publicly reporting school performance, rewarding school improvement, and intervening in low-performing schools (U.S. Department of Education 1999).

Committed Staff. Schools with personalized cultures support high achievement for all students, and the entire staff welcomes all students and their families (Allington and McGill-Franzen 1995; Cawelti 1999a;

Cuban 1989). Teachers genuinely like at-risk students, want to work with them, and understand their backgrounds. Everyone holds a failure-prevention orientation and accepts responsibility for each student's academic success. Faculty recognizes the critical relationship between how they present their material and how well their students will understand it and apply it to new situations. Teachers believe that if they thoroughly understand their academic disciplines and their learners' natures, their students can learn anything (DeLamater 1999). They also believe that student effort, achievement, and improvement — not measured ability — determine student learning (Collopy and Green 1995).

Professional Teamwork. Helping all learners meet high standards requires teachers working together. Collaboration between regular and special educators ensures that weaker learners, with or without labels, have access to rigorous curricula and classroom interventions. Core teams of teachers, administrators, counselors, parents, and resource educators regularly meet to discuss and monitor ways to increase individual students' achievement with classroom modifications and available resources. In addition, the schools' infrastructure includes time for teachers to plan together (Virginia Department of Education 1999; Walmsley and Allington 1995).

Principal Leadership. When principals influence school goals, raise academic expectations, maximize instructional organization, maintain an orderly and caring school environment, monitor student progress, and

participate visibly in daily school events, more students learn.

Multiple Sustained Changes. Learning is a complex activity, and many factors affect it. Schools successful with at-risk learners make many changes in organizational structure, curriculum, and teaching and learning practices to increase the academic achievement of their at-risk students. For example, school size matters for many at-risk students, so successful learning climates for at-risk students are frequently small, structured, and caring (Cawelti 1999*b*; Cuban 1989; Klonsky and Klonsky 1999; McPartland et al. 1997; Meier 1996). These schools contain approximately 200 students with class sizes ranging from 15 to 20 pupils. Whether housed in a small building or structured into small interactive units — such as schools-within-schools, interdisciplinary teams, "houses," or "academies" — educators and students get to know each other very well. The "family feeling" encourages warm and trusting relationships among administrators, teachers, and students (Cawelti 1999*b*, p. 15).

Providing Early Intervention

Slavin and Madden point out that "Learning deficits easiest to remediate are those that never occur in the first place," (1989, p.6). A growing body of evidence refutes the idea that school failure is inevitable for any except the most mentally undeveloped children (Cawelti 1999*a*; Slavin, Karweit, and Wasik 1992/93; Slavin and Madden 1989; U.S. Department of Education

1999). Success in reading in early grades does not guarantee later school success; but it does prevent the negative spiral of remediation, retention, and social promotion that reading failure brings.

Early interventions likely to have the greatest impact on preventing student failure and increasing the likelihood of school success include programs from birth to age three, preschool programs, kindergarten programs, and elementary programs.

Programs from Birth to Preschool. High-quality early childhood programs with developmentally appropriate learning experiences for three- and four-year-olds have been shown to result in substantially improved student achievement (Cawelti 1999*a*; Roberson 1997/98). At-risk students have much to gain by participating in well-designed early learning experiences.

From birth to age three, child-based interventions with infants and toddlers place them in stimulating, developmentally appropriate environments for part of the day. Family involvement is one of the keys to preschool success (Pool 1997/98; Roberson 1997/98). Family-centered interventions give parents training and materials to help them stimulate their children's cognitive development, help with discipline and health issues, and assist with their own vocational and home-management skills (Comer 1980; Slavin, Karweit, and Wasik 1992/93). Although it takes intensive interventions several years to produce lasting effects on measures of cognitive functioning, even short-term effects benefit children's learning.

Similarly, preschool experiences for four-year-olds have merit as part of a comprehensive approach to prevent early school failure. The important skills needed for literacy develop before children enter kindergarten, and they do not develop spontaneously; instruction shapes them (Bodrova, Leong, and Paynter 1999). One study shows that high-quality preschool programs can cut poor children's lifetime arrest rate in half and can significantly improve their educational and subsequent economic success by age 23 (Schweinhart and Weikart 1998). Another study (Roberson 1997/98) shows similar preschool students have achievement gains when compared in later elementary school with peers without preschool experiences. Preschool experiences have immediate and short-term effects on children's measured abilities and are related to students' likelihood of not being retained and not receiving referrals for special education placement in later grades (Slavin, Karweit, and Wasik 1992/93) and not dropping out of school (Berrueta-Clement et al. 1984; Slavin and Madden 1989). However, though attending a high-quality preschool program has long-term benefits for children, it is usually not enough by itself to prevent early school failure for at-risk children (Slavin, Karweit, and Wasik 1992/93; Slavin and Madden 1989).

Kindergarten and Primary Grade Programs. Full-day kindergarten programs that use research-based curriculum and instruction and parental involvement increase students' social and formal language skills over participation in half-time kindergartens. These gains,

unfortunately, are not maintained beyond the end of first grade (Slavin, Karweit, and Wasik 1992/93; Slavin and Madden 1989).

Because serious consequences result from failing to learn to read in the early grades, one-to-one tutoring for first-graders appears to be the most effective approach for preventing early reading failure (Slavin, Karweit, and Wasik 1992/93). Several popular programs that use teachers as tutors, such as Success for All (Slavin and Madden 1989; Slavin, Karweit, and Wasik 1992/93; Viadero 1999), Reading Recovery (Pinnell, Deford, and Lyons 1988), and Prevention of Learning Disabilities (Silver and Hagin 1990), have the largest and longest-lasting effects. One study finds that Success for All cut referrals to special education by 50% (Slavin 1996). When tutoring is combined with other interventions, such as high-quality preschool and full-day kindergarten, research-based curriculum and instructional methods in all grades, nongraded organization for reading, and parental involvement and support, students make and keep greater academic gains (Slavin, Karweit, and Wasik 1992/93).

Research on early grades interventions demonstrates that educators can help children enter fourth grade reading, regardless of family or personal backgrounds. At the same time, Slavin and his colleagues (1992/93, p. 16) note that:

> intensive early interventions for at-risk children with no follow-up in improved instruction is unlikely to produce lasting gains. . . . Intensive early interventions followed by long-term (inexpensive) improvements in instruction

and other services can produce substantial and lasting gains.

At all grade levels, reading problems are the most frequent and serious reason for student failure. Thus teachers must be prepared to use successful research-based practices to teach reading.

Fostering Continuity of Teacher-Learner Relationships

Personalizing learning with varied relationship-based strategies appears to advance at-risk learners' achievement. These approaches include looping, multi-age organization, cooperative learning, academic tutoring, mentoring, and advising. These relationship-based techniques, while frequently used in early grades, also succeed in middle and high school.

Looping and Multi-age Organization. At-risk learners often benefit from extended time with the same teacher (Little and Dacus 1999; Rasmussen 1998). In looping or multiyear teaching, one teacher works with a common group of students for two or three years. With fewer transitions to make each September, more teaching and learning occur.

Multi-age or nongraded primary school organizations group students across grade lines according to their skill levels and move them through a hierarchy of skills at their own pace. Multi-age groups may also include teams of up to five teachers who facilitate learning with groups of 150 students for at least six years, instead of losing touch with each class after each year (Egol 1999).

Instructionally, both looping and multi-age grouping help teachers better understand and meet their students' individual learning needs. The time together increases opportunities for students to receive individual teacher feedback to enhance learning. Because teachers promptly identify and remedy early learning needs, students do not lose ground relative to classmates. Moreover, the extended time together helps teachers postpone high-stakes decisions about retention or social promotion while they work to maximize each student's learning and achievement (Rasmussen 1998).

Equally important, continuity builds strong bonds of mutual respect and trust between students and teachers, creating classrooms that resemble "extended families" (Cuban 1989, p. 31). Students feel belonging to a group and a supportive environment, and group cohesion contributes to the students' learning successes (Comer 1980). Likewise, the continuous contact improves teachers' relationships with parents because they work together for several years.

Research finds that simply regrouping students across grade lines for reading and math instruction in small groups increases students' achievement (Slavin, Karweit, and Wasik 1992/93). Research also suggests that multi-age groupings within and across classrooms have positive effects on students' motivation and learning (Cuban 1989).

Cooperative Learning. Cooperative learning groups place students together in small learning teams to master material initially presented by the teacher. When team

members receive rewards based on the learning of each team member, cooperative learning methods can be consistently effective in increasing student achievement (Cuban 1989; Slavin and Madden 1989). Not only must teachers direct and structure student work groups to ensure the best learning and social relations for the groups, they also must supplement peer-mediated activities with professional interventions to address individual learning needs (Fuchs et al. 1997).

Academic Tutoring. Academic tutoring is an effective and highly personalized intervention that increases at-risk students' learning (Cawelti 1999*a*; Fashola and Slavin 1997; Slavin and Madden 1989; Slavin, Karweit, and Wasik 1992/93). Pairing at-risk learners with a trained adult (often a licensed teacher) or older peer helps to adapt learning to the learner's own pace, learning style, and comprehension.

Furthermore, tutoring at-risk students builds positive relationships between students and tutors. With shared experiences over time, respect and trust grow. The caring bonds motivate enhanced student learning, while practicing and using new skills and knowledge increases the student's classroom competence.

Mentoring. Mentoring pairs at-risk learners with a caring adult or older peer for tutoring, academic assistance, career preparation, or successful role modeling to learn problem solving. Mentoring often includes attending sports events, sharing meals, and participating in community and cultural activities that the student might not experience without the mentor's involvement.

Advising. Advising pairs students with adults outside the classroom, usually teachers or school counselors, who have responsibility for the students' total educational experience. Working one-on-one, they build a caring and trusting relationship that permits them to design and monitor the student's personalized learning plan. Both understand the student's learning style, the family situation, and academic strengths and weaknesses; and they use these data to set personal goals and make educational decisions. In addition, advisors serve as guides and advocates for at-risk students with other educators, parents, and community agencies.

When the mutual confidence and respect found in these relationship-based strategies link with clear instructional goals, attention to the student's learning needs, and prompt feedback used to improve learning, at-risk students feel motivated and supported in learning.

Providing Meaningful Curriculum and Instruction

Personalizing learning environments increases at-risk students' desires and efforts to learn. "Engaged" students show time on task, persistence, concentration, enthusiasm, and care for their work (Schlechty 1990).

Unfortunately, the percentage of students seriously disengaged from their own learning as they progress through the grades is increasing (Hargreaves and Fullan 1998). At-risk students' prior failures make them want to avoid — physically, mentally, and emotionally — new situations in which they are likely to fail. In addition,

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middle and high school students' social and outside interests compete with academic content for their attention (Newmann 1989).

Five factors contribute to students' academic engagement: 1) need for competence, 2) extrinsic rewards, 3) intrinsic interest, 4) social support, and 5) sense of ownership (Newmann 1989). Educators mindful of these factors can create personalized learning experiences to motivate their at-risk students.

Need for Competence. Most young people need to have enough cognitive understanding and skill mastery to affect their world. Feeling competent brings a sense of control — rather than helplessness — over one's life.

Extrinsic Rewards. At-risk students are not necessarily motivated by the high grades, college admission, well-paying jobs, and teacher or peer approval that typically attract high-achieving peers. Their engagement increases only when they believe that their school achievement will lead to rewards that they value and that their own efforts will lead to that attainment (Newmann 1989).

Intrinsic Interest. Intrinsic interests are naturally meaningful. However, those having the greatest trouble in school often take the narrowest view about what is worth learning (Firestone 1989). Teachers must make the connections between classroom content and the students' own lives clear and appealing.

Social Support. Unless at-risk students trust teachers and peers to respect them as learners, weaker students

will avoid embarrassment by not trying, and thus not failing.

Sense of Ownership. Finally, at-risk students are more likely to invest in schoolwork when they have some choice and control over what they learn, how they learn it, and how its mastery will be assessed. Student ownership of learning is especially critical for at-risk learners, who generally feel no control over their achievement apart from their refusal to participate.

A growing body of research finds that teacher expertise is one of the more important school factors influencing student achievement. A relationship exists between students' interest, investment, and success in their schoolwork and their teachers' repertoire of techniques for engaging them (Darling-Hammond 1999; Hill and Crevola 1999; Viadero 2000*b*; Wolfe 1998).

Students learn more when their teachers use engaging instructional practices. Teachers should understand the subject matter so thoroughly that they can provide students with appropriate intellectual challenges, organize the content to help students develop cognitive maps, and differentiate instruction. They should assess each low-achieving student's particular learning needs and then develop and use individualized learning plans.

According to Shelor and Hohmann (1995), teachers can increase their students' psychological investment in learning with these instructional practices:

1. Clearly articulated expectations about what students will learn, the qualities of the final product, and the time frame for learning it.

2. A safe and nonthreatening learning environment where students can learn from their mistakes without embarrassment or penalty.
3. Personal relevance in the curriculum so it relates to the students' own interests or life experiences.
4. Choice in what students study, with whom they study it, and in the manner in which they present their learning.
5. Students work together to practice and apply learning to solve problems or create products or performances.
6. Novelty in the variety of learning activities available over time.
7. Frequent and affirming teacher feedback to correct, encourage, or validate the student's learning progress.
8. Students make learning immediately useful and relevant to solve a problem or to create a product or performance.

Students also will learn more when teachers:

- Provide direct instruction for very specific skills and knowledge. To be fully effective, direct instruction must be combined with meaningful content connected to students' own life experiences and prior learning and must actively include reasoning and critical thinking (Cuban 1989).
- Conduct ongoing and varied formative and summative assessments of student learning. The information should be used diagnostically for instructional planning for individual students, as well as for the class

as a whole; for providing feedback to students that they can use; and for determining student mastery (Darling-Hammond 1999; Hill and Crevola 1999).

- Align the taught and tested curriculum to ensure that all students have an opportunity to learn the content and skills on which their academic progress will be measured (Hill and Crevola 1999).
- Remain sensitive to students' different cultures, language needs, gender differences, and other experiences that shape background knowledge and use this knowledge to increase the curriculum's personal meaning and relevance for students (Shelor and Hohmann 1995; Hill and Crevola 1999).
- Use the variety of curriculum resources and technologies (Danielson 1996).
- Collaborate with colleagues to bring extra professional supports and resources to student learning (Darling-Hammond 1999).
- Regularly analyze and reflect on their own work, determine its effect on student learning, and modify future instruction as students responses indicate (Danielson 1996; Darling-Hammond 1999).

Sound instructional practices, along with the respectful and trusting relationships between teachers and students, create the safe and intellectually challenging classrooms that keep at-risk students learning.

Providing Extra Help and Extra Time

At-risk learners often need extra time and extra help in order to meet high achievement standards. Identify-

ing and intervening as soon as possible provides the most successful way to keep these students progressing academically (Norton 1990; U.S. Department of Education 1999).

Strategies for providing extra time and help include academic tutoring and mentoring, increased learning time during the school day, increased learning time before and after the school day, increased days in the school year, and alternative schools.

Tutoring and Mentoring. Academic tutoring and mentoring offer effective and highly personalized interventions that increase student learning (Cawelti 1999*a*; Fashola and Slavin 1997; Slavin, Karweit, and Wasik 1992/93). Both approaches provide extra learning time for at-risk students focused on the learner's particular academic and social needs.

Innovative School Schedules. Increased learning time helps at-risk learners by giving them more occasions to master essential skills and knowledge. For example, students can receive extended learning within the regular school day with block scheduling. Longer class periods give at-risk learners enough time to receive small chunks of information, practice it under direct teacher supervision, receive prompt and specific individual feedback about its correctness, and use the feedback immediately to increase learning. The repeated chances to practice the new material correctly and meaningfully make it more likely for the at-risk student to remember and use it again later.

Before- and After-School Programs. Schools and community organizations increase learning time by offering supervised before- and after-school programs. Either on-site or in the neighborhood, these centers can offer homework assistance and tutoring, as well as refreshments and recreation for students. Homework clubs in community centers or churches offer similar assistance for increased learning time.

Year-Round Schools. In this increasingly popular school calendar, schools have longer breaks throughout the school year and shorter vacations in the summer. Students continue learning and applying their learning without long vacations in which to forget what they learned. Instead of a six-week review in September and October, students gain up to six weeks of extra learning time from this revised school schedule.

Summer School. Summer school, either optional or required, offers at-risk students additional learning time to catch up with classmates (Aidman 1997/98; U.S. Department of Education 1999). Students can repeat courses previously failed during the school year or focus on essential skills and knowledge that the student needs to pass barrier exams or meet grade-level expectations. With innovative scheduling that permits slower or failing students to immediately retake a course during the regular school year, summer school offers time to finish the previous year's requirements, permitting students to start the new academic year on time.

Extending Time in High School Before Graduation. Another approach to extending learning time for at-risk

students involves adding extra time to high school by changing a student's grade placement (Grant and Richardson 1999). This extended time may involve evenings, extra work, summer school, or another semester to prevent failure in grade. Working with an at-risk student and parents or guardians, the education team reviews the students' learning needs and determines if the student can make satisfactory academic progress with additional school time. If all agree, they adjust the student's schedule to delay graduation.

Alternative Programs. Alternative programs, including transitional and dropout prevention programs for middle and high school students, offer more personalized learning environments, structural and program innovations, and more time to meet grade-level competencies needed for rigorous high school study.

Successful alternative programs share small size, clear entry and exit criteria, unambiguous academic standards, explicit behavioral and attire expectations, and small classes where students and teachers work closely together (Raywid 1995; U.S. Department of Education 1999). Students, teachers, and parents want to be there, and they create a caring learning "community." Teachers effectively diagnose and teach to the student's learning needs, making learning challenging and engaging. Students often work together collaboratively. An atmosphere of mutual respect, trust, and support encourages continued attendance and learning.

Family involvement and intensive counseling are critical components of alternative programs. Parents

may be required to communicate frequently with teachers about their child's progress and to assist their child with studying. Families also may be expected to join their children in enjoyable school events, attend plays and student performances, or participate in family games nights. Likewise, schools connect at-risk students with professional school counselors to learn and practice improved problem solving.

Creating Effective Home-School Partnerships

Effective partnerships between teachers and parents are essential components in creating successful learning for at-risk students. Schools showing the greatest achievements for at-risk students also show strong ties between parents and teachers in ways that actively support student learning. Family behaviors in a school-home community are far more critical to students' level of learning than is the family's poverty level (Redding 1997).

Many parents do not know what they can do to help their children learn. Literacy projects can help parents learn strategies to help their children read better and become more successful in school. Parent centers provide welcoming places in school for parents to meet with educators and resource persons. They can discuss child-rearing and learning issues and make referrals to community services (Fowler and Corley 1996). In addition, having someone in the school who is multilingual and is available to work with parents can build bridges between families and schools (Halford 1996).

Schools with large at-risk populations may become "full service schools," which bring social services agencies and educators together. For example, when there are health clinics in schools, the schools report better attendance, lower dropout rates, and fewer teen pregnancies (Dryfoos 1996).

Whatever the learning challenges for at-risk students, effective and caring educators must find meaningful ways to connect with parents. They should extend invitations to the school and provide outreach activities in the communities. They must listen to parents' concerns, not just tell about the school's agenda (Brandt 1998). Parents have a powerful influence on their children's learning that educators can use to promote academic success for at-risk students.

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Conclusion

The best alternative to retention and social promotion is to ensure that all students learn successfully in the first place. Personalized learning environments in schools and classrooms help at-risk students succeed. Personalization occurs when a school is committed to high achievement from at-risk learners; when opportunities are presented for early prevention of school failure; when at-risk students and teachers know, trust, and respect each other; when at-risk students find curricula meaningful and relevant; when instructional practices increase at-risk students' personal investment in learning; when extra time and extra help are provided to support learning; and when there is strong parental involvement in students' academic progress.

Meaningful instruction taught by competent teachers in caring school environments contributes to all students' academic achievement. Helping all at-risk students become competent learners prevents the need for retention and social promotion. And retention and social promotion are practices that our clients, our profession, and our nation can no longer afford.

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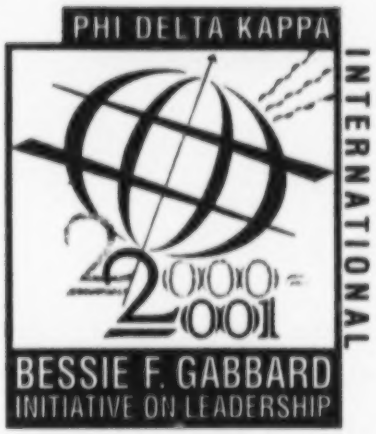

Bessie F. Gabbard Initiative on Leadership

The Bessie F. Gabbard Initiative on Leadership in Education for the 21st Century, dubbed the 2000-2001 Celebration for short, reaffirms the central importance of the Phi Delta Kappa tenet of leadership. Bessie F. Gabbard (1905-2001), the "First Lady" of PDK and a member and longtime chair of the board of governors of the Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, provided the impetus for this initiative, which will focus the energies of PDK members and staff during the two years of transition to the new millennium. During this 2000-2001 Celebration, special attention will be paid to leaders and leadership in education with a particular focus on PDK's traditional advocacy on behalf of the public schools.

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Hands-on science asks kindergartners to identify items that can be picked up by a magnet in this photo, circa 1953.

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